Learning Together: Issues for Language Minority Parents and their Children

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"You know, the measure of a person is how much they [sic] develop in their life" (Brown, 1986, p. 103). Teacher and civil rights activist, Septima Clark, voiced this opinion through her teaching, writing, and living. Practitioners and researchers in the field of Early Childhood Education often speak of "child development"[1] as if it is a phenomenon that occurs in isolation, and unfortunately, we often approach early childhood instruction as if the child is growing in a vacuum. Yet, the reverse is dramatically obvious—the child is developing in

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conjunction with other developing children and adults. In the case of linguistically and culturally diverse children, development is occurring within the context of two or more languages and both home and school cultures. We have witnessed this dramatic development while implementing a family literacy project for limited English proficient (LEP) families in five school districts in the El Paso, Texas area.

Project Description

Project FIEL (Family Initiative for English Literacy) is being implemented under a three-year federal grant from the Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Afairs (OBEMLA). The goals of project FIEL follow: (a) to enhance literacy and biliteracy development of the parents and children through a series of participatory intergenerational activities; (b) to provide information regarding the literacy development process in children to the parents and to provide a setting for the parents to use the information; (c) to enhance parents' self-confidence to contribute to their children's literacy development through participatory group interaction, and (d) to empower the parents to connect the literacy activities to their own social and cultural situations, thus encouraging their use of literacy for personal, family, and community purposes.

The design of Project FIEL is based on a five-step instructional model which relies heavily on students' prior knowledge to address the child's present learning needs. The project strategies value cultural and linguistic diversity while assisting children and adults in literacy development. Once a week, parents and their children meet at their neighborhood schools to participate in small group instruction. The classes, which last approximately ninety minutes, consist of five to seven parents and their prekindergarten, kindergarten, or first grade children. A teacher and an assistant act as facilitators for the group.

The lessons center around a theme which varies on a weekly basis. Themes are selected to meet the following criteria: (a) to be of interest to young children, and (b) to provide information and allow for an open-ended foundation for interesting and meaningful discussion both in class and at home. Some of these themes have been included: puppets, families, recipes, health food/junk food, music, holidays, cotton, the very first Thanksgiving, plants, and friends.

The Instructional Model

The instructional model involves the participants in five types of activities.

The design allows for language and ability variation. All of the steps in the curriculum are done in English, Spanish, or both, depending on the proficiencies of the particular group and what is more natural and comfortable for them.

The first step of the curriculum model is called the *Initial Inquiry*. In this step all the families participate as a large group. The instructor begins the class by modeling appropriate language development behaviors such as questioning, expanding, reinforcing, and praising while engaging in a discussion around the lesson theme.

The *Learning Activity* is the second step. A story-writing activity is developed naturally and personally, both in terms of interest and ability. The parent and child work together to create a story based on the learning activity. The instructor, the assistant, or both, provide guidance as needed. If a preschool child has drawn a family picture, either the parent (who may have a preprimer reading level) or the child can label the drawing in Spanish, English, or both. In a different family team, the child may dictate the story while the parent writes. In some instances, a child may guide the parent in literacy skills while the parent uses his past experiences to expand the story line.

The third step is the *Language Experience* activity. A story-writing activity is developed naturally and personally, both in terms of interest and ability. The parent and child work together to create a story based on the learning activity. The instructor, the assistant, or both, provide guidance as needed. If a preschool child has drawn a family picture, the parent, (who may have a preprimer reading level), the child, or both, can label the drawing in Spanish, English, or both. In a different family team, the child may dictate the story while the parent writes. In some instances, a child may guide the parent in literacy skills while the parent uses his past experiences to expand the story line.

The fourth step of the lesson is the *Storybook Demonstration*. In this step all the families come together again, and the instructor demonstrates interactive reading, giving the children the opportunity to ask questions or make comments on the story as it is being read. Both children and parents are encouraged to relate the story to their own lives. In a lesson on family celebrations, for example, the families might discuss traditional Mexican celebrations such as "El día de los muertos" (Day of the Dead) or family celebrations such as "Quinceañeras" (cotillion or 15th birthday party for girls). The parents may discuss the medicinal use of herbs in their home for a lesson on plants.

The final step of the lesson is the *Home Activity*. Before the participants leave the class, the instructor suggests possible home activities. Families are encouraged to continue literacy growth through additional parent-child home activities. These activities will vary depending on the theme of the lesson. For a lesson on

plants, for example, the suggestion for the family may be to record observations on the growth of some beans which the children planted in class. For a lesson on the family the suggestion might be to make a collage of family photographs or to write about some individual family members.

Theoretical Framework for the Model

The design of Project FIEL has three underlying premises, all of which are solidly grounded on past research in the fields of literacy and language acquisition. The first premise is parent involvement and its positive effect on children's lives. The second is the holistic approach to the acquisition of literacy skills. The last premise is the acceptance of code-switching in the classroom as an effective teaching and learning strategy. An elaboration of each of these premises follows.

The positive impact of parents' involvement in their children's education has been documented in many studies (Careaga, 1988; Sandoval, 1986; Simich-Dudgeon, 1987; Taylor, 1983; Wells, 1986). These studies identify parental help and support as highly significant factors or even the most significant factors accounting for children's developing high levels of literacy and thereby for their success in school. Parental involvement is an integral part of Project FIEL; however, parental involvement is treated differently than it is in most projects since parents participate in class instruction with their children. A cooperative, reality-based learning environment is created as the family draws on each other's talents and abilities to complete the lessons.

Whole language, an approach to language learning which emphasizes that language is best learned when it is taught naturally as it occurs within any social environment, is another aspect of the project. This approach is considered effective by many experts (Bissex, 1984; Bruner, 1984; Ferreiro and Tebrosky, 1985; Goodman, 1986; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Manning, Manning, & Kamii, 1988; Smith, 1984). Edelsky (1991) defines it well:

> whole language is a theory in practice about education generally. It takes seriously a distinction between using language and doing language exercises. ... It includes a theory about the nature of language and language learning, a philosophical position on education, and a political position regarding distribution of power. (p.8)

The curriculum incorporates whole language strategies by basing lessons on themes. As families are introduced to a particular theme, work on hands-on projects, and create stories, these strategies are elaborated. Language experience

is used in family teams as the children decide what stories they want to write and then go back and read them. The families are working with text which is not only whole but is also meaningful and interesting.

Another significant and effective feature of Project FIEL is the use of code-switching in the classroom, which we define as alternation between languages (in this case between English and Spanish) within or between utterances.[2] While code-switching was stigmatized in the past as a practice that led to mental confusion, retardation in language development, and even low intelligence (Hakuta, 1986), it has more recently been recognized as a style of speech which shows bilingual grammatical competence on the part of the speaker (Huerta, 1977; Pfaff, 1976, 1979; Poplack, 1983; Poplack & Sankoff, 1980).

Code-switching, in addition, has been found to enhance communication and learning among bilingual students in the classroom (Aguirre, 1988; Jacobson, 1985; Olmedo Williams, 1983; Tukinoff, 1985; Zentella, 1981). We at Project FIEL accept code-switching in our literacy classes and in so doing feel we have made a significant and positive step towards our goal of teaching literacy behaviors to the parents and children through their own voices.

The FIEL staff considers code-switching a part of the whole language approach. As Goodman (1986) states, "Whole language programs respect the learners: who they are, where they come from, how they talk, what they read, and what experiences they already had" (p. 10). In other words, by accepting the use of both languages in the classroom as they occur spontaneously and naturally in the speech of the families and instructor, we validate the past and present sociolinguistic experiences of the parents and children and thus enhance the sociocultural meaning of the learning process for each participant.[3] Our four point rationale for the use and acceptance of code-switching in the classroom is based on our personal experiences and research with bilingualism:

1. The goal of Project FIEL is to develop literacy—be it in one or two languages (biliteracy).

2. Code-switching is a legitimate form of communication among bilinguals.

3. Code-switching allows our students to express their thoughts and ideas in a natural, comfortable, and precise way; it provides a means for expression of their own voices.

4. Code-switching raises the students' self-esteem; it gives value to their past linguistic development, and we have found no evidence in the literature which states that code-switching prevents or inhibits the development of literacy or biliteracy (i.e., the development of either English or Spanish, or both).
Furthermore, while specific methodologies with respect to separate or alternating language use are not proposed, the development of biliteracy among bilingual

children is supported in the literature (Barrera, 1983; Gallegos & Franco, 1985; Garcia, 1982; Goodman, Goodman, & Flores, 1984).

Preliminary Findings

Case studies on several of the participating families have been done using ethnographic methods of data collection including participant and nonparticipant observations, pre and postinterviews, videos of class sessions, work samples, and conversations with the participants. These data collection procedures have led to a series of preliminary findings which show not only the positive impact of such a program on parents and children but also dramatize many of the sociocultural issues which involve language minority children. These findings are listed below, and then each is discussed using supporting data which is representative of the various case studies we conducted.[4] The examples also serve to give a better understanding of how this model is actually implemented in the classroom.

With regards to the parents we made the following observations:

1. Parents become actively involved in a program which meets their needs and interests within a social context in which they feel comfortable, respected, and valued as intelligent human beings.

2. The primary motivation for parents' involvement in such a program is to help their children succeed with their learning endeavors.

3. Parents, when approached as colleagues in teaching, are open to new information regarding learning and are willing to implement this information in their interactions with their children. As colleagues, they also provide cultural information which enhances the learning situation.

4. Parents, when given the opportunity, will break the "culture of silence,"[5] and voice their own reality in an effort to transform their personal, family, and community situations to better serve their needs.

With regards to the children our findings reveal the following:

1. Children respond enthusiastically to their parents as teachers.

2. Children will respond to a different way of reading and writing in a different setting. Programs which encourage developmental writing as a valued process do not confuse children even if they are also exposed to rigid, traditional instruction in another setting.

3. Children, with encouragement and acceptance, do gain self-confidence to

read and write.

4. Children will voice their own reality in terms of culture, social issues, and cognitive development when it is valued as a sharing of knowledge. Through this process they are able to become true multicultural learners and are not forced to extinguish one culture in the interest of gaining knowledge of another; nor are they forced to deny any aspects of their own development.

Discussion

The first finding was that the parents were responsive to the program; they accepted our invitation to join the literacy classes. We have often heard that it is difficult to persuade language minority parents to participate in school activities,[6] and our experiences with Project FIEL confirm that getting the parents to enroll and stay in a program requires much effort. But, it is possible if they are consistently approached in a warm and respectful way. Evidence of this finding can be found in our attendance data as seen in Figure 1. These data show a high record of attendance, particularly considering that there were measles and chicken pox epidemics in the area at the time.

Figure 1. Project FIEL, Year Two attendance data. Figures refer to the number of families attending. Each family consisted of approximately 2.5 individuals.

Family Enrollment		
Fall 1989	Spring 1990	Total Families
60	88	148
Perfect Attendance		
Fall 1989	Spring 1990	Total Families
13	12	25
		(17% of total of 48)
Attended at least 83% (10 of 12) of the Classes		
Fall 1989	Spring 1990	Total Families
37	39	76
		(51% of total of 148)

The second finding about parents was that their primary motivation for attending a literacy class was to help their children with their education. This

information was obtained directly from the parents participating in our program through interviews and questionnaires. This information supports the claim that the education of their children is a priority with these language minority parents; they want their children to be successful in school and in life and will do everything within their means to help them. The parents clearly stated this in their own voices:

"Me gusta aprender más y así poder enseñarle a mis hijos." (I like to learn more so that I can teach my children.)

"Yo quiero lo mejor para mi hija y si de esta manera yo puedo ayudarla, pues lo hago." (I want the best for my daughter, and if this is the way to help her then I'll do it.)

"Tiene uno como padre mucho que apprender y mucho que enseñarle uno a sus hijos" (As a parent one has much to learn and much to teach one's children.)

"Estoy consiente [sic] que para poder enseñar a mis hijos, bien primero tengo que apprender yo." (I realize that in order to teach my children I first have to learn.)

The third finding was that parents are receptive to new information when they are welcomed as partners in educating their children, and they will make use of this information to help their children with learning tasks. The home assignment data for Year Two showed that approximately half of the parents in attendance completed at least 85% of the assignments with their children. Additionally the parents stated that they were spending more time doing learning activities, such as reading, with their children. They were also letting go of their children and letting them write freely without holding their hands or telling them exactly what to write as they had done during the first few classes. The children's work samples provide evidence of children doing their own writing. Parents commented on this as follows:

"Antes cuando yo les decía que escribieran o dibujara [sic] algo me decían que no sabía [sic], o no podía [sic], ahora ya no, ellas escriben y dibujan solas y me dicen lo que dice su papel." (Before when I would tell them to write or draw they would say they didn't know how or couldn't, not any more; they write and draw by themselves and they tell me what the paper says.)

"Ideas que quizás a mí nunca se me hubiera [sic] ocurrido explicarles, ahora tomo más tiempo para explicarles cualquier cosa por insignificante que parescan [sic]." (Now I take time to explain things, as trivial as they may seem, ideas that perhaps never would have occurred to me.)

The social context which is created in the classroom is critical for this type of development to take place. The parents must feel they are sincerely valued as individuals who have knowledge to pass on to their children and share with other

families. Care must be taken that their traditional roles of authority within the family not be violated. This authority is exercised in our program when the parents and children work together as a team on an art project and a language experience story related to the project. The children often turn to their parents for help in drawing, cutting, pasting, and writing. Of course, this transfer of knowledge is at times bidirectional, as for example, when a parent is illiterate, or even multidirectional, as when a sibling is also participating in the group.

In the case where the parent is illiterate, however, the authority is still maintained as he contributes by way of an oral story line which the child writes or draws on paper. Thus the parent is not made to feel incapable of teaching the child, since the child still turns to the parent for help. In a lesson on health food and junk food, for example, a parent helped her daughter sort pictures of different foods into the health food group or into the junk food group. Even though the parent could not explain in writing why each was in its respective group, she could help her daughter orally.

Thus, the social context of the classes is one where knowledge is built on the strengths the families bring with them to the class, rather than one which seeks to find weaknesses (often labeled deficits) which need to be corrected. Parents will be open to new information and ways of doing things with their children when they perceive that they, themselves, are respected in the process as knowledgeable and capable human beings.

Regarding the fourth finding, parents, when given the opportunity, will openly express themselves and voice their own reality. In our classes this opportunity exists primarily because of the interactive nature of the classes (i.e., the instructor acts as a facilitator rather than as a lecturer) and because of the social context which makes parents feel comfortable and respected. They are willing to comment and let their experiences and ideas be heard within the classroom, knowing that their comments are valued rather than dismissed as irrelevant or trivial. When a parent was asked at the end of the program what had been most useful to her from the classes she responded, "tener oportunidad de participar...tener la libertad para hablar" (having the opportunity to get involved...having the freedom to speak up).

During a lesson on music a parent told of her father's love of music and his talent for playing certain instruments. In another lesson on plants the parents openly talked about how they used various plants and herbs for medicinal purposes in their family. One parent summed up her feelings about these experiences in the classes when she commented, "I talk now. Before I didn't want to talk to nobody [sic]. I'd like to participate more." This same parent also voiced her own reality in writing. As a single parent, she was living with her

sister and was uncomfortable with the situation. One day, when the participants were asked to write on their emotions, this mother wrote that she felt sad when "my sister doesn't help me do the housecleaning." She also expressed her parental stresses when she wrote she was sad "because Christy and Brenda won't behave." These events were significant in this parent's development, since she rarely, if ever, shared her feelings and concerns with others. This parent exhibited initiative in terms of transforming certain aspects of her life for the betterment of her family. Towards the end of her year-long participation in the program she announced to us that she had made the decision that it was time to leave her sister's house. She had subsequently made an appointment with a social worker to discuss the possibility of finding public housing. No standardized assessment measure validates this woman's transformation, yet the documented evidence through the study shows that she responded positively to the social context of participatory learning, to the acquiring of knowledge about her children's learning, and to the potential of her newly acquired self-confidence.

Findings Regarding Children

We found the children were enthusiastic about attending the classes together with their parents. The children looked forward to this time when they shared activities. The parents expressed the same enthusiasm about setting aside some time to spend together with their children doing activities enjoyable to both as seen in their comments:

"Se pone contento cuando es el día de asistir a las clases." (He is happy on the day when we have class.)

"These classes have become the conversation at the dinner table. As soon as we get home my kids talk about what went on in this class with an increasing interest. They want to show me what they learn in this class and we work together to show their Dad what they learn in this class."

"Antes de venir a estas clases no compartíamos tanto con los niños y ahora sí." (Before coming to these classes we did not spend time together with the children and now we do.)

"We got to communicate more...I really like them."

"Me gustaría que duraran más tiempo." (I would like for the classes to last longer.)

The second finding was that children will respond to different ways of doing things within different contexts. This is mentioned because of a dilemma we encountered at the beginning of our literacy classes. The children were encouraged

to do their own writing (or prewriting) and reading in our classes, using whole language and the language experience approach which encourages invented spelling and developmental forms of expression. Yet, in their regular classes throughout the day, they were exposed to a phonics approach to reading and an approach to writing which emphasized letter formation and correct spelling.

Also, code-switching is generally not accepted in their regular classes. Staff members were concerned that this discrepancy would not allow the children to develop in our literacy classes as we would like because the children were only exposed to our classes one hour a week. Instead, with encouragement from both parents and teachers, most of the children in our classes began to write on their own at varying points during the semester. Their written self-expression was genuine; some of the writing samples showed language alternation between Spanish and English.

Another finding was that the children gained confidence in doing their own composing and writing. The children's work samples provide evidence that children, when placed in a social context which encourages them, will write naturally in a way which is meaningful to them. The role of the parents here is crucial in helping their children through this developmental process. Several interactions between parents and children were documented that showed that at the turning point of a parent accepting and praising developmental literacy work by the child, the child's production of literacy increased.

The last finding with regards to the children in our program was that they, too, will share their own reality when they perceive that it will be respected and valued. Listening to the children's voices through discussion was a part of every class, and the children participated enthusiastically, as can be seen in the following dialogue excerpts:

[Class theme: music]

Teacher: ¿Y cuál es su conjunto favorito? (What's your favorite musical group?)

Child: Los buquis. (The Buquis.)

[Class theme: plants]

Teacher: ¿Para qué sirven los árboles? (What are trees useful for?)

Child: Para secar la ropa y darle sombra al carro. (To dry the clothes and provide shade for the car.)

[Class theme: Sometimes I feel Scared]

Teacher: ¿Cuándo te sientes así? (When do you feel like this?) [pointing to a drawing of a happy face].

Child: Cuando me dejan ir al rio. (When they let me go to the river.)

Other

Child: Cuando me compran hamburguesas. (When they buy me hamburgers.)

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[Class theme: family]
Teacher: ¿En qué le ayudan a sus mamas? (What do you help your mother with?)
Child: A hacer tortillas de harina. (Making flour tortillas.)
Other
Child: A tender la cama. (Making the bed.)

Implications

The data collected to date from the family literacy program relate to several issues regarding social context issues in education for language minority young children. Our data support the following implications:

1. Families as learning participants provide the logical and vital link between home culture and school instruction, both in terms of social context and factual information.

2. Transfer of knowledge in an interactive intergenerational setting is complex and rich in terms of directionality of instruction, content, and process.

3. Intergenerational, bilingual settings in which parents and children participate enhances confidence that can empower parents and children to voice their own reality and to be advocates for themselves and each other.

4. Bilingual family literacy groups provide alternative opportunities for literacy development.

This project was unique in its design, yet we feel the data can be applied to other teaching situations. The findings emphasize the importance of the individual teachers familiarizing themselves with each of their students and their families. An appreciation for the students' home culture, language, and familial situations encourages a positive social context. In addition, this attention to the social context provides information to the teachers regarding students' background knowledge, learning style, and concrete ways curricula can be related to each student so cognitive processes can be facilitated.

In sum, our data represent but a small stepping stone in a long process leading to the empowerment of language minority children and their parents through models of education which invite them to succeed rather than to drop out. Nonetheless, we feel this is a significant step forward, for as the celebrated novelist Maxine Hong-Kingston said, "We can change the world...word by word" (1989).

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Footnotes

[1] Child development and early childhood specialists define development in terms of both research that indicates universal, predictable sequences of growth in all children, as well as research that documents individuality of timing of growth, temperamental characteristics, and environmental and cultural influences.

[2] Definitions for code-switching will vary across the literature; our definition may correspond to what others call code-shifting, code-alternation, language alternation, or language mixing. Standardization of this term in the literature is needed.

[3] See Huerta-Macías and Quintero (1991) for a more detailed discussion on code-switching in the classroom.

[4] The limited amount of space prevents us from presenting case studies in their entirety. Thus, examples of interactions are instead presented as evidence for the preliminary finding.

[5] Freire (1985) refers to the culture of silence as existing among the masses when they are mute and "prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being" (p.50).

[6] This was reiterated just recently as the writers met with other Title VII directors at an OBEMLA training institute. The same comment has been heard through communication with those involved in the administration of other parent involvement projects.